

## “Trash Rises”: Class Consciousness and the Transcendence of “White-Trash”

### Assumptions in Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina*

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#### [Abstract](#) [Resumen](#)

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What is class? This question is impossible to ignore when so much of *Bastard out of Carolina* centers around the Boatwrights’ economic situation and the subsequent class-based assumptions about the family. Generally, class<sup>i</sup> refers to comparing the means of production to earnings received; it can refer to the income levels that make a distinction between the wealthy and the impoverished; or it is defined by social values adopted by or assigned to a particular group of people (Sandell 219). In *Bastard out of Carolina*, the middle classes of Greenville County consider the Boatwright family to be “*no-good, lazy, shiftless*” (Allison 3). In other words, they are “trash,” and American assumptions about this class of people allow for the perpetuation of this unwanted stereotype.

According to David Reynolds, assumptions about “white trash” are often rooted in the blood-line theory. This theory states people have a genetic disposition to be “trash,” which unavoidably draws them to a steady diet of junk food, beer, and cigarettes and results in classifying them as lazy, stupid, and depraved by mainstream society. According to this theory, “trash” fall victim to social scapegoating; therefore, they are

ultimately blamed for racism and racist attitudes, welfare fraud, and obesity (360). Although this theory may not be socially recognized, it is often carried out when people from the dominant classes appropriate the causes for social problems and blame the social classes’ genetic dispositions to disrupt the otherwise natural flow of society.

The blood-line theory is the basis for many of the generalized assumptions and stereotypes of lower-class society, and evidence can be seen in *Bastard out of Carolina* in the distinctions between the Boatwright family’s values and the assumptions higher-class families, such as the Waddells, make about the Boatwrights. As Bone grows out of childhood and into adolescence, she develops a heightened awareness of her family’s socioeconomic status, which gives her a sense of class consciousness. She struggles with emotionally connecting to her family—especially the uncles she worships and the aunts she respects—and disassociating herself from their “trash” image. Bone’s internal resistance to her family’s societal image and her simultaneous affection for them plays an important role in developing her identity.<sup>ii</sup>

Bone’s understanding of class consciousness develops, in part, because of Anney’s shame toward the Boatwright “trash” image, and her ensuing motherly wish for both of her daughters to grow up without this socioeconomic label. Anney’s pride divides her between anger toward people who label her and her family as “trash” and being trapped in a standard of living that allows for such a label to persist: “We’re not bad people. And we pay our way. We just can’t always pay when people want” (Allison 82). Anney understands the connection her community makes between inability to pay bills on time and labeling her “trash,” just as she understands how Bone’s illegitimacy similarly helps to perpetuate this stereotype. However, Anney insists she could have

prevented public scrutiny regarding Bone’s illegitimacy if she had been conscious during Bone’s birth: “She was convinced that she could have bluffed her way through it, *said* she was married firmly enough that no one would have questioned her” (Allison 3). Yet, Anney did not have the chance to insist “firmly enough” that her child was legitimate during the birth, so throughout Bone’s early childhood, Anney makes frequent trips to the courthouse to apply for a new birth certificate not stamped “ILLEGITIMATE.” Anney’s persistence creates tension between her and Granny, who “said it didn’t matter anyhow. Who cared what was written down?” (Allison 3). Yet, Anney cares, because Bone’s birth certificate represents “an emblem of the state’s power over people of her class, of the rigid social distinctions that seem to work only to the detriment of the poor” (Guinn 24). Anney spends the duration of the novel attempting to defy the “emblem” of illegitimacy by using the law—she makes repeated visits to the courthouse on her own and she hires a lawyer to advise her on the process—but both attempts fail because by using the courthouse, Anney seeks help from the same oppressive institution that assumes illegitimacy is an affliction reserved for the lower class (Baker 119). Although the lawyer Anney hires tells her the illegitimacy law is “not enforced anymore anyway” (Allison 9), she asks him why it is enforced on her, to which he replies: “You don’t need me to tell you the answer to that. You’ve lived in this county all your life, and you know how things are” (Allison 9). In other words, Anney should know that the Boatwright reputation as a “trash” family exacerbated by Bone’s illegitimacy make it unlikely that any socially constructed legal institution will not continue to maintain lower class assumptions. Anney’s only option, then, is to marry Daddy Glen in order to perpetuate Bone’s legitimization, a seemingly failsafe plan.

However, Anney’s hope marriage will increase her chances for socioeconomic mobility does not last long as Daddy Glen cannot stay employed, and thus, provide for his family. Because Daddy Glen and Anney are unable to make regular rent payments, their family moves around so much that, according to Bone, “moving had no season, was all seasons. Crossed time like a train with no schedule. We moved so often our mail never caught up with us” (Allison 65). Although Anney willingly endures the repercussions of her inevitable poverty, she refuses to accept that her children will never rise above the poverty she endured as a child: “I was never gonna have my kids know what it was like. Never was gonna have them hungry or cold or scared” (Allison 73). When Daddy Glen cannot provide for the family economically, Anney uses her beauty and sexuality to make money. Although social or familial do not necessarily expect or even suggest Anney engage in prostitution to buy groceries, this scene seems to illustrate that Anney—a poor mother with an economically unreliable husband—has few options for feeding her children. If the law will not help her legitimize her daughter’s birth certificate, it seems the context of the novel does not give her the option of relying on it to help her family during economic hardships. It seems prostitution becomes one solution to the quandary of many poor girls and women: “they may use their vagina to make money or their uterus to make children” (White 165). However, while Anney uses her vagina to make money to feed her children, prostitution is not a permanent solution, because she only does it once. Although her brief prostitution appears to be the self-less act of motherhood, in doing so she undermines the solidarity of her marriage. Anney’s prostitution and Daddy Glen’s subsequent anger and helplessness seems to Bone as if his rage could soon be directed at her: “Daddy Glen ran out and stood on the tarmac watching Mama drive away. [. . .] I

knew he could easily break my arms as methodically as he was cracking his knuckles, wring my neck as hard as he was wringing his hands” (Allison 75). Not only does this scene demonstrate Anney’s limited options in providing for her children, it illustrates Bone’s role as a scapegoat in the family and the target for Daddy Glen’s rage.

Although Glen comes from an upper-middle class family, both his marriage to Anney and his inability to keep his manual labor occupations, identify him as, and align him with, the lower class. His attempt to maintain the middle-class superiority of his father’s family and his reality of living the lower-class life makes him angry and his anger searches for a scapegoat. He targets Bone, and subsequently, she is blamed for the family’s misfortune. Daddy Glen’s perceptions of his lower-class status perpetuate violence toward Bone, both physical and sexual abuse (Sandell 220), as he often finds a reason to abuse her after his own father belittles him. Bone’s illegitimacy—the unequivocal representation of “trash”—makes her body a target for violence. According to Rita Felski, there is a bourgeoisie/proletariat dualistic theory of the body: the upper classes are identified as being disciplined and hygienic; whereas, the lower classes are identified as vulgar, excessive, and tasteless (35); in both cases, actions or appearances of the body polarize the identifications. In the novel, if Daddy Glen can be seen as one who was once a part of a bourgeoisie-type class and continues to attempt to retain that identity, and Bone is represents the lower class, Daddy Glen’s sexual and physical abuse of his stepdaughter partially can be explained as his expressive anger toward everything he despises in “trash”—illegitimacy, ugliness, stubbornness, and laziness. His fight against Bone’s class is enacted in his violation of her body, which literally embodies the lower class assumptions Daddy Glen self-righteously hates.

Even as a child, Bone’s knowing “to the penny what everything cost” (Allison 65) gives her an awareness of her economic situation that develops into a “trash” class consciousness—an understanding of the implications of embodying “trash.” Heleieth Saffioti argues that class consciousness displaces any other type of consciousness one can realize from her situation (87). The novel can be read as an attempt to deconstruct binary terms that distinguish the privileged middle class from the lower class: “industrious/lazy, legitimate/illegitimate, respectful/shameful, civilized/uncivilized” (Baker 118). As Bone comes to understand these dichotomies, she also begins to realize how they are self-serving for the middle-class and meant to be oppressive. Yet, they often are arbitrary because the behaviors of the middle class do not live up to their idealized images these dichotomies represent.

Bone recognizes this hypocrisy in the Waddells’ assumptions about and disgust with their “trash” in-laws, the Boatwrights: “Trash steals, I thought, echoing Aunt Madeline’s cold accent, her husband’s bitter words. ‘Trash for sure,’ I muttered, but I only took the roses. No hunger would make me take anything else of theirs” (Allison 103). Daddy Glen’s sister-in-law, Madeline, represents the Waddells’ attitudes toward the Boatwrights. When Bone steals the rose petals from the Waddells’ garden, she responds to an anger she feels as a kind of “hunger,” one that “would throb and swell behind my tongue until I found myself standing silent and hungry in the middle of a family gathering full of noise and food” (Allison 98). After she steals Tootsie Rolls from Woolworth’s and the manager disgraces her, Bone’s shame and anger evolve into a similar kind of hunger, “as if my rage had used up everything I had ever eaten” (98). Allison does not offer any kind of illusion that there is the possibility that Bone will overcome this hunger; in other

words, Bone, like many other poor whites who begin to develop class consciousness, experiences an anger that does not go away no matter how much her economic situation can be justified or she becomes aware of how her negative perception of her class status results from societal assumptions. This anger, for Bone and for others in the novel, can only be projected—either onto the people who belong to the class that oppresses them, such as the Waddells, or onto lower-class black families whose race seemingly makes them blameworthy for a number of “white trash” misfortunes.

*Bastard out of Carolina*'s representation of black families also speaks to American society's values regarding economic class, as these families often become the target of social blame, similarly to lower-class white families. The roots for the 1960s black family in America can be traced to the mid- and late-eighteenth century, “when slaves combined African and American cultural beliefs and practices into a distinctive Afro-American system of family and kinship with its own rules of courtship, sexual behavior, and marriage” (Mintz and Kellogg 68). In the 1960s (the time period in which the novel takes place), America's black families received scrutiny by the American government for being unstable as the number of illegitimate births and black families living in poverty steadily increased (Mintz and Kellogg 210). The Moynihan Report<sup>iii</sup> signifies one primary historical example of American society's attempt to troubleshoot the instabilities of black families. Just as lower-class families received scrutiny because of the apparent perpetuation of their economic situation, so did black families; the Moynihan Report attempted to pinpoint the exact reason why black families seemed to be “failing” to fulfill social expectations of a functioning family unit. However, while the Moynihan Report identified poverty, illegitimacy, and single-parent households as social

issues, some of the indicated problems caused by black families—such as illegitimacy and fatherless households—were exaggerated, as were the disparities between black and white families. Black and white families of the same economic status, including those who are among the lower class, have few differences between them, despite Moynihan’s racially based claims in his report (Mintz and Kellogg 212).

According to the Moynihan Report, the role of black men in the family unit had been undermined by at least three decades of unemployment, not to mention the adverse effects of slavery, followed by the poor education and swift urbanization during Reconstruction (Mintz and Kellogg 210). Moynihan attributed the cycle of poverty and disadvantages among black children to the lack of a male role models in female-headed households (Mintz and Kellogg 211). However, Moynihan failed to fully realize the affect of low-wage jobs and the welfare system on black family instability: “Low wages and the unstable, dead-end occupations available to black men contributed to a sense of frustration and powerlessness that prevented many lower-class man from becoming stable husbands and fathers” (Mintz and Kellogg 212). In other words, although the Moynihan Report attempted to blame black men for creating unstable female-headed households, black men who tried to earn sufficient wages had few and limited options.

Assumptions and misinformed conclusions drawn about black families, such as those made in the Moynihan Report, allowed for the perpetuation of racism and lower-class projections on black families, which opponents of the report perceived after its release in August 1965: “Critics feared that the report would reinforce white prejudice by suggesting that sexual promiscuity and illegitimacy were socially acceptable within the black community and that the instability of the black family was the basic cause of racial



inequality” (Mintz and Kellogg 211). Whereas the middle classes tend to treat the lower classes as scapegoats, blaming such problems as racism, welfare fraud, and obesity on them, lower-class whites tend to project their concerns about lack of jobs and poverty onto lower-class blacks, and critics feared the details of the Moynihan Report would only perpetuate this tendency.

Some of the Boatwright family members in *Bastard out of Carolina* demonstrate this projection, especially the uncles. When Bone’s Aunt Alma moves into an apartment with black neighbors after her husband cheats on her, for example, Wade’s response is “cursing Alma to her face” out of anger: “Running off with a man’s children, living in that dirty place with niggers all around” (Allison 86). Rather than feeling regret for being unfaithful to his wife, Wade is disgusted that his family, which he considers to be superior to blacks, is living among African Americans. This projection of his anger and possible guilt allows him to ignore his philandering and blame his wife’s leaving him on someone other than himself.

The racial superiority exhibited by some of the Boatwrights is ironic because family legend claims there is some “colored” blood in the family, which further complicates the race/class dynamic in the novel: “Raylene was always telling people that we had a little tarbrush on us” (Allison 53). Although Raylene’s claim possibly exaggerated the Boatwrights lineage, Bone recognizes “it was true that one or two of the cousins had kinky hair and took some teasing for it, enough that everyone was a little tender about it” (54). Despite this possibility, there is still evident racism in the family. Bone catches onto these racist attitudes at a young age, and could quite easily begin to acquire them, especially when she develops an angry “hunger” about the hypocrisy of

social class distinctions. However, all of the misfortunes, economic difficulties, and tragedies in the family clearly generate from *within* the family. Earle's drunkenness often lands him in jail; Wade's infidelity ultimately compels Alma to move out and later go mad; and Daddy Glen's temper makes it difficult for him to keep a job. Because Allison focuses the family's dysfunction on itself, Bone is not prone to projecting her angry "hunger" on blacks (Fine 121); in fact, her limited interactions with them are perpetuated by her fascination and, more importantly, her identification with them. However, the blacks in the novel do not appear only demonstrate the self-development of whites. On the contrary, the blacks are presented as a mirror to the Boatwright family, rather than as a foil.

Bone first sees "colored people up close," after Alma moves into the apartment with the black family in the same building: "Shiny brown faces kept pressing against the glass and then withdrawing, stern black faces that we could barely tell one from the other" (Allison 83). Although Bone's cousin, Grey, quickly labels the faces as "niggers" and explains they are "scared of us," Bone continues to watch the window, studying the face that is prettier than her cousin's. Although the Boatwright boys eventually play with the black boys who live in the downstairs apartment, Grey still identifies them as "niggers," to which Bone responds, "'You call her that and she might bite you. *I would*' (emphasis added)" (Allison 86). By telling Grey that the girl in the window would react violently to being called a "nigger," a label Grey applies casually, Bone aligns herself with this girl, and perhaps without even realizing it, identifies with the victimization of African Americans, represented in the novel with the racist label "nigger," which is used out often out of anger or attempt at oppression. Because Bone knows what it means to be

despised and branded a “bastard” or “trash,” labels used by people of higher social standing, she has little tolerance for a similar application of oppression, even to a person whom her family members consider socially lower than themselves.

Bone has a similar realization of racial oppression and prejudice during her fascination with religious revivals and gospel music. During this time she meets Shannon Pearl, an albino child spoiled by her middle-class parents, and especially adored by her mother. Mr. Pearl books musical talent for the religious revivals, and Bone often travels around Greenfield County with this family, going from one tent revival to the next. During one of their trips Bone hears through a forest of cottonwoods, “Gut-shaking, deep-bellied, powerful voices [ . . . ] I could feel the whiskey edge, the grief and holding on, the dark night terror and determination of real gospel” (Allison 169). When Bone suggests to Shannon that they tell Mr. Pearl about this singing talent, Shannon responds, “My daddy don’t handle niggers” (170). Although Bone is aware of the class differences between the Pearls and her family, she does not feel openly discriminated against until the aforementioned exchange between her and Shannon: “The way Shannon said ‘nigger’ tore at me, the tone pitched exactly like the echoing sound of Aunt Madeline sneering ‘trash’ when she thought I wasn’t close enough to hear” (170). Bone’s altercation with Shannon Pearl makes her realize that to all people—family, friends, or strangers—she and her family are considered “trash;” for people of higher classes, the Boatwrights are disregarded and hated in the same way as the “niggers” in Greenville County. This realization only strengthens Bone’s identification with the black community, rather than gives her leverage to feel superior like it does for the men in her family.

In her essay, “A Question of Class,” Allison describes growing up and feeling as if her family did not belong to any distinguished groups; rather, they made up some kind of “Other,” of which nobody on the outside wanted to be a member: “My people were not remarkable. We were ordinary, but even so we were mythical. We were the *they* everyone talks about—the ungrateful poor” (13). In *Bastard out of Carolina*, the Boatwrights are presented in such a way that everyone else becomes the *they* or the Other. However, Allison does not present the Boatwrights so they are easily polarized, as lower-class families often are. The Boatwrights do not fit into the falsely romanticized concept of the hardworking “good poor” or the lazy “bad poor” (Sandell 213). The concept of the noble poor, impoverished people whose hard work and good intentions still cannot elevate them above their social class, is sharply contrasted with the concept of the lazy poor, small-minded and indolent people who use their poverty as a crutch and a means to squander charity. In contemporary society, lower-class people are thought to fit into either the noble poor or the lazy poor stereotype. Allison’s presentation of the Boatwrights and their similarities to black families in the novel, complicates these polarized assumptions.

Allison’s portrayal of the Boatwright family and her individualized characterizations of its members both reinforces and destabilizes the stereotyped images of “trash.” Although Bone’s uncles have a tendency toward violence and serving time in jail, they are also humanized through their continuous loyalty to their sisters, and they serve as unconventional role models for Bone and her cousins, even though the women in the family, such as Raylene, realize the uncles are not to be admired unconditionally: “All you kids think your uncles are so smart. If they’re so smart, why they all so goddam

poor, huh? You tell me that" (Allison 217). Even though the Boatwright are sensitive about the issue of poverty, they understand they will always be poor.

Despite the family's realization of their inevitable poverty, it seems the Boatwrights make important distinction made between poverty and "lower class." Anney's pride, Granny and Raylene's propensity for storytelling, and the uncles insistence on providing for their wives and children, presents them to each other the same as they are presented with any other family, and only Bone openly glares at people she thinks are judging her. But to Raylene, she and the rest of the family always have the opportunity to emerge as something new and untainted: "'Trash rises,' Aunt Raylene joked the first afternoon I spent with her. 'Out here where no one can mess with it, trash rises all the time'" (Allison 180). The trash Raylene is referring to is garbage people drop off the highway that floats down the river, and eventually rises back to the surface in the bend of the river near Raylene's home. This reference to trash rising, however, has a double meaning because the Boatwrights, too, as "trash" have the potential to rise out of the dark muck of class consciousness and be recognized for more than society's garbage. As Bone's sense of class consciousness develops, she resists the label of "trash" that has been applied to her family, yet in doing so, risks alienation from those family members who have a role in raising her, and eventually protect her from further abuse by Daddy Glen. The angry "hunger" that develops in Bone only seems to be fed when she forms an internal alliance with the blacks in Greenville County. Her sensitivity to their being called "nigger" mirrors her sensitivity to being called "bastard" or "trash," and this sensitivity and awareness seems to feed her "hunger." Unlike Daddy Glen and the judgmental members of families like the Waddells and the Pearls, Bone does not project her anger

onto an individual or a group she thinks is in some way or another “below” her. Rather than directing her anger at an undeserving scapegoat, she aims it at her oppressors. This inner backlash gives her agency in determining how to interpret social categories that are defined by class and race, and the subsequent assumptions about the people who belong to these categories. If Bone were to project her anger onto an undeserving race, it would allow for the perpetuation of a legal and social system that keeps labels such as “bastard,” “trash,” and “nigger,” in place. However, Bone’s developing understanding of where these false assumptions generate allows her to undermine those prejudices and begin to generate a sense of consciousness that transcends class-based oppression.

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<sup>i</sup> The terms “class” and “social class” will be used to refer to groups of individuals who inhabit similar social powers, economic privileges, and social prestige. Typically, the two primary facets of social class are occupation and education, which determine more specific attributes such as annual income and property ownership. The lower-class is the smallest group that is made up primarily of unskilled manual laborers. The working class, which is slightly bigger than the lower class, includes semiskilled and skilled manual laborers. The middle class, which is the largest group, is made up of white-collar workers and professionals. The middle class is divided into the lower middle, which includes shopkeepers, clerks, and salespersons; and the upper-middle class, which includes professionals, proprietors, and individuals with some college training. The elite class is made up of a small number of individuals who are economically wealthy and are of reputable lineage (see Kohn p. 46). When discussing *Bastard out of Carolina*, I have concluded that the Boatwrights are a lower-class family because their jobs require no training and/or skills. The Waddell family, however, is an upper-middle class family because they are college-educated professional workers.

<sup>ii</sup> It may seem as if Bone’s resistance to her family is her attempt to assimilate to her society’s dominant values, which arguably could move her toward developing into an adult who would successfully live and function within this society. However, Bone also cannot ignore her affection for her family and her interest in them as people, rather than simply society’s judgment of them as “trash.” Therefore, Bone identity development must negotiate society’s image of her family and her personal image of her family.

<sup>iii</sup> In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then an assistant secretary of labor, released *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, which has come to be known as the Moynihan Report. According to this study, the deterioration of black society in America was a result of the deterioration of the African-American family unit. According to the report, men’s roles in black families have been weakened by a number of factors (one being the implementation of the Jim Crow laws), which ultimately led to the dissolving of marriages, an increase in illegitimate births, an increase in female-headed households, and an increase in welfare dependency. The report emphasized the importance of strengthening the economic role of black men in the family unit, and pushed for black families to resemble that of a nuclear family model (see Mintz and Kellogg 210-13). However, while the Moynihan Report was supported at the time of its publication, it is no longer considered a credible resource when studying the historical problems in African-American families, because it is now regarded as a social justification for racism. I chose to reference it, however, because *Bastard out of Carolina* takes place in a society that would have willingly accepted the conclusions drawn by the Moynihan Report.

